

Deer Creek Pilot

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Yazoo Pump: Protecting people or political pork?

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Editor

Editor's Note: This is the first of a four-part series examining the roles of Sharkey and Issaquena counties within the context of the South Delta's most controversial flood control project.

ROLLING FORK—For both the degree of passion or the amount of rhetorical excess surrounding any issue, it's hard to top the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project. It's been fought over since the holy grail of flood control in the Mississippi Valley, the completion of a promise made by the United States government to South Delta residents more than 60 years ago. Those who oppose it see it as the worst kind of political pork barrel project, horribly damaging to the environment and justified by futility data.

When it comes to the public debate over the Yazoo Pump, there is precious little middle ground, as proponents and opponents alike appear determined to win at all costs, not only politically, but in a court of public opinion through passion-filled public pronouncements and doctored letters to the editor on newspaper editorial pages.

Championing the project are the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, its local sponsor, the Mississippi Levee Board, Delta Council, the state's congressional delegation, local governments and the editorial boards of several Delta newspapers. Opposing it are a number of government agencies, most private environmental, conservation and taxpayer watchdog groups, and the editorial boards of not only the state's largest newspaper, but those of the nationally influential New York Times and Washington Post.

As the volume of the debate rises, so too seemingly does the level of rhetoric employed by both sides—to a point that the objective observer might be inclined to discount much, if not all of it. So when does the wheat of fact separate from the chaff of hyperbole, at least as far as the twin counties are concerned? On which side does the truth lie, or is this instance, as in so many others, is that truth to be found somewhere between the conflicting agendas of the respective arguments?

First, that Sharkey and Issaquena constituents represent the core of the pump project backbone, the Deer Creek Pilot has convened an independent review of the heat data available as it relates to the twin counties—the Corps' engineers' preliminary report is up to date, federal Flood Insurance Program documents, elevation maps, personal interviews, census information and the land rolls of both Sharkey and Issaquena counties. The results of that investigation paint both an enlightening and sometimes surprising picture.

BACKGROUND
Originally authorized by Congress in 1944, the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project, part of the multi-state Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, is intended to alleviate backwater flooding in the "Swamp" of Mississippi's South Delta—primarily Sharkey and Issaquena counties, which represent more than half of the area the pump would protect.

As currently envisioned by the Corps of Engineers, the project provides for the construction of a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pumping plant (one of the largest, if not the largest in the world) at the site of the Steele Bayou water control structure in southeastern Warren County, along with the acquisition of 62,206 acres of conservation easements from willing sellers.

As water levels on the Mississippi River rise, existing flood control gates are closed to keep river waters from flowing "back" into the South Delta, and spilling over the low-lying lands in the twin counties. This results in a "closed system" for the

South Delta, where not only water from other drainage outlets to the north, but any rain which falls, pools here and results in backwater flooding of various degrees in most years. The Corps estimates that 231,457 cleared acres in the South Delta floods on an annual basis, although that statistic, like virtually all utilized in support of the project, is questioned by its opponents.

The Yazoo Pump would evacuate the excess internal water back into the main Mississippi River channel. The pump would be utilized only for such backwater flooding events and would not be effective for, or even utilized against headwater flooding down the Mississippi.

Under the Corps' currently proposed plan, the pump would become operational when backwater levels reached 87 feet National Geodetic Vertical Datum (NGVD).

"We like to say that it [the pump operation] would take four to four and one-half feet off any given flood," Mississippi Levee Board chief engineer Jim Wiesemeyer said. "If you had three feet of water in your house in 1973, you wouldn't have any with the pump."

Such a pump would not be cheap—either to build or to operate. In its preliminary project report released in 2000 (a final version is expected to be in the works), the Corps set the cost of the pump at \$161 million and said it would cost an additional \$1 million per year to maintain and operate over its 50-year projected span of use. Based on current population figures, that would translate into a little more than \$23,000 for each man, woman and child in Sharkey and Issaquena counties.

But the Corps calculates that its 925,901-acre project area—52 percent of which it says is Sharkey and Issaquena combined—would never overall flood above levels of \$1.47 for county \$1 billion. In what is a key component, both of the plan and of the controversy surrounding it, the Corps calculates both the geographic area which the pump would protect and the benefits which would accrue from its utilization based on the 100-year flood—a flood event of such magnitude and duration that it would occur, on average, only one year in every hundred.

In that a pump with a 50-year life span is designed to protect against a 100-year flood, there is, in essence, a \$231 million bet on the national table that 100-year water levels will go south before the pump reaches the end of its useful life.

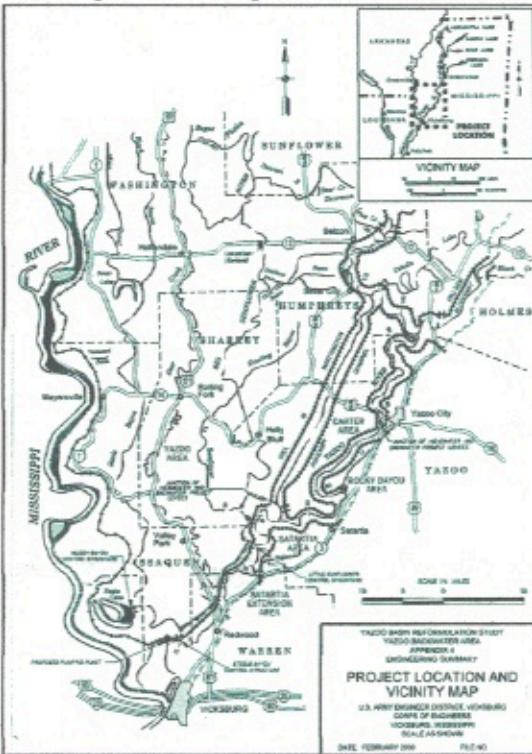
WHERE DOES IT STAND NOW?

Staunch proponents of the project, Mississippi's two U.S. senators, Thad Cochran and Trent Lott, last month succeeded in including language which would appear to provide for virtually perpetual funding for the Yazoo Pump into an omnibus federal spending bill, then beat back an effort led by Arizona Sen. John McCain—a vocal critic of pork barrel spending—to remove it.

Informants were told the Deer Creek Pilot that action infringing the Bush White House's wishes and included only \$250,000 for environmental study of the pump project, is in a budget submitted to Congress. That language was disengaged when the administration's Office of Management and Budget redlined the pump project as a potential budget-buster.

However, last Thursday Senate and House conferees flexed their political muscles and reached agreement on the omnibus spending bill, which includes \$10 million in spending for the pump project in Fiscal 2003. The only immediate hurdle remaining to the project's advancement would appear to lie within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is on record as opposing the pump as which by law must pass environmental muster.

NEXT WEEK: Who are the people here the pump would protect?



YAZOO BACKWATER PUMP PROJECT
APPENDIX I
ENGINEERING SUMMARY
U.S. ARMY ENGINEER DISTRICT, VICKSBURG
CORPS OF ENGINEERS
HOPEFUL, MISSISSIPPI
SCALE 1:250,000
DATE: FEBRUARY 2003
FILE NO. 1